

Concord-Alewife Planning Study

Meeting Notes: February 11, 2004 Committee Meeting

Committee Members Present: Al Wilson, Chuck Mabardy, Doug Brugge, Mitch Goldstein, Hom Sack, Ann Tennis, Joe Barrell,

City of Cambridge Staff: Iram Farooq, Susan Glazer, Stuart Dash, Susanne Rasmussen, Catherine Preston, Taha Jennings

Consultants: David Dixon, Ron Mallis, David Black

Review of Previous Meetings

After a brief introduction by Susan Glazer, David Dixon reviewed key points of the December 10, 2003, public meeting:

- Emphasis on a north-south buffer close to the Highlands linking into the larger open space system both within Concord-Alewife and regionally.
- The western end of Quadrangle should contain housing, parks, and possibly some retail.
- Concord Avenue has greatest potential in the Quadrangle. Smith Place should be used to draw investment interest into the Quadrangle from Concord Avenue.
- The area of the Triangle that is adjacent to Alewife Brook Parkway offers a good location for higher density mixed-use development.
- The Shopping Center should be transformed into a more walkable village center, with housing over retail.
- The “greening” of Concord-Alewife translates into considerably less surface parking, with attention paid to sustainability and green design.
- There should be imaginative approaches taken to the use of shuttles and other forms of transit to enable people to get to and from the MBTA station from throughout the Concord Alewife study area.

David also reviewed the following key points of the February 2, 2004 meeting with property owners:

- Ensure the plan is realistic and fair, with zoning that allows the market to invest in this area.
- There is interest in large-scale approaches to land use, including creating a public realm that would increase value.
- Given the potential for \$1 billion worth of investment over 20 years, a figure of \$25-\$30 million worth of infrastructure improvements is seen as doable.

David reminded the Committee that that Al Wilson is also working on two initiatives – (1) an at-grade crossing, and (2) a commuter rail station. The ultimate plan will be able to accept either or both, but doesn't depend on them.

Review of Zoning and Urban Design Guidelines

In introducing the zoning review, David Dixon pointed out that the goal is to manage the next development booms, and to use that investment power to achieve the desired urban design goals.

Iram Farooq reviewed the Citywide Zoning initiative in the context of the Concord-Alewife Planning Study. She noted that the citywide process looked closely at permitted uses and modified FARs (Floor Area Ratio), specifically commercial FARs, in Concord Alewife by as much as 1/3 in order to create incentives for housing as well as address some of the traffic generation issues in the area.

The zoning recommendations for Concord-Alewife in this study began with a determination of the appropriate general locations for different intensities of height and density, with a higher intensity of both moving towards the east within the study area. Iram noted that in other planning studies, specific height bands, or sub-zones, were created to ensure adherence to development and design goals. David Dixon pointed out that mechanisms such as transfer of development rights (TDRs), correctly applied with a fair balance between “givers” and “takers,” would benefit all property owners by maximizing value. However, TDRs would not be used to drive the plan.

There was a discussion of the special permit process, specifically, ensuring that the issuance of permits follows adherence to a set of guidelines that would be based on the plan. Special permits would be used as a way of providing an incentive for developers to achieve the plan’s overall goals. Stuart Dash emphasized that the zoning is an effort to “bound” potential outcomes, and that further refinement of FARs, for example, may continue to be made, to ensure against an overrun of one use or another.

David Dixon noted that the intent of the plan is a mix of appropriately sited housing and commercial development. This will help to facilitate a sense of community and the kinds of public and retail spaces that the Committee and the public are seeking. Iram added that the plan follows a citywide policy of allowing more generous zoning for residential uses because of the need for housing in Cambridge.

Introduction of Plan for Shopping Center

The owners of the Fresh Pond Shopping Center were invited to present, through their architects, the initial plan for the redevelopment of the shopping center property. The general thrust of the plan is to create an environment that is a town center type of destination, with pedestrian-focused activities at street level. The redesigned Shopping Center will have a face on Danehy Park, along with housing, office space, a hotel, two levels of commercial and retail space, considerable green space, and parking both below- and at-grade. The plan will continue to undergo refinement based on public response and market considerations.

General Discussion

Susanne Rasmussen noted continuing concerns regarding an at-grade vehicle crossing between the Quadrangle and the Triangle, and stated that, the rail authorities would not be interested in approving such a crossing at this point in time.

One committee member strongly urged a close look at early-stage development initiatives in the study area, including activity on the Adley property adjacent to Highlands.

Public Comment

- There was positive response to the emphasis on open space and low-impact development.
- Concern was expressed regarding proposed reductions in FARs in the Quadrangle, further, that one of the premises of planning is to improve property values, and not eliminate – through reductions – that value.
- There was concern as to whether the Quadrangle is suitable for housing: in addition to the railroad tracks, much of the land is filled, and therefore may be dangerous for children.
- A question was raised regarding the floodplain overlay district, and the need for zoning that is appropriate to floodplain regulations.